Barrie, Alan J. (Feb / March 2025) ***A continuation of the History Wars in Australia: The East-West dichotomy and the legacy of Herodotus.***

The concept of “WESTERN CIVILISATION”, or, the “Western tradition” has become a politically loaded term, supported by right wing conservatives and maligned by the left. This ‘debate’ has been exacerbated in Australia with the creation of the Ramsey Centre for Western Civilisation

> *Launched in November 2017 by former conservative Prime Minister John Howard, the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation was bankrolled by part of the $3 billion fortune of Paul Ramsay, the deceased head of the Ramsay Health Care empire. Over the years, Ramsay had donated millions to the Liberal Party, whose health policies proved conducive to his empire building. Heirless and ageing, and with the midwife assistance of Howard and former conservative Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Ramsay decided to leave a swag of his fortune to the purpose-developed Ramsay Centre. Its mission was to generously bankroll an arts degree in three Australian universities, pitched to a hand-selected cadre of undergraduate students – each with scholarships on a par with those competitively granted to doctoral students. As Tony Abbott – one of its main architects - explained in the conservative journal QUADRANT last year,* ***the centre would be ‘not merely about Western civilisation, but in favour of it’*** *(his emphasis). Vigilance (he continued) would need be kept to ensure the course was not derailed by leftism, and that a right-wing trajectory was maintained. Sympathetic commentators noted how – sinisterly – cultural Marxism had contaminated Australian universities.*
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> Overland literary journal: Universities: the good, the bad and the Ramsay Centre, 28 March 2019, by Rowan Cahill
> https://overland.org.au/2019/03/universities-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ramsay-centre/

And, from its own Facebook page: *“The Ramsay Postgraduate Scholarship empowers exceptional young Australians to pursue graduate study at the world's top universities, from Oxford and Cambridge to Harvard and Princeton, with up to AUD$90,000 per year, it helps cover tuition, living and travel costs for up to three years.” (The caveat being that the young scholars MUST promote and defend ‘Western Civilisation’.)*

Former Liberal PM of Australia, Tony Abbott, is a Director of the organisation. He added elsewhere that *“The fact that it is ‘for’ the cultural inheritance of countries such as ours, rather than just interested in it, makes it distinctive. The fact that respect for our heritage can no longer be taken for granted in our premier teaching and academic institutions, makes the Ramsay centre not just timely, but essential. It would be surprising if a musician did not in some sense love music or a writer love literature. Likewise, no one would be shocked by Muslims insisting on respect for their faith or by Aboriginal people demanding the means to keep their culture alive. Indeed, we’d be taken aback if they were indifferent to their heritage, let alone hostile to it. These days, though, the one culture that is not normally allowed to celebrate and cherish itself is our own.”*

Originally published in *The Australian*, 20 November 2017
https://tonyabbott.com.au/2017/11/ramsay-centre-western-civilisation-looks-golden-age-before-us/

When tax issues regarding perks and benefits for the Ramsay Centre were raised in Parliament on 30/3/2022, Senator Faruqi from the Greens said:

> *We are in a situation where we have floods in New South Wales and Queensland. We have a housing crisis. People can't make ends meet. Young people are burdened with huge study debts which are holding them back. Rather than addressing these issues that affect millions of people, here we have a government trying to sneak in deductible gift status for the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation—a move that will allow the centre to avoid taxation on their income. My amendment will stop this from happening. We cannot allow the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation to further cement its influence in our universities, on our students and in the curriculum. The Ramsay centre wants nothing more than to churn out students with an uncritical view of Western civilisation, and the government knows that. It's not as if university curricula across the country have any dearth of material that they already teach about Western civilisation. No university curriculum is even remotely lacking in Western history, literature or politics.* ***All the Ramsay centre wants is to glorify Western civilisation, with as much influence as possible from their Howard and Abbott led vote. It is shameful that the government wants to aid the Ramsay centre's project to airbrush imperialism and colonialism out of Western civilisation studies.*** *This centre is about nothing but an aggressive and extremely political right-wing agenda. Let's not forget that Tony Abbott said, 'This centre isn't about Western civilisation; it's in favour of it.' We must push*

> *back hard against this idea of cultural supremacy and stand strongly for academic freedom and critical thinking. I urge my colleagues in the chamber to support my amendments.*
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> *https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/Hansard_Display?bid=chamber/hansards/25536/&sid=0231*

Moving from politics to academia, many contemporary scholars have challenged the concept of 'Western Civilization' as a monolithic entity, arguing that it is a construct used to justify Eurocentric perspectives and colonialism, further aligning with the idea of a 'fictional' narrative. 'Westernism' is a type of 'superiority complex', that justifies itself through the projection of 'differences', rather than 'similarities' between peoples. On this note, my own introduction to this issue came via a different means, when creating a new Ancient History unit / chapter on King Xerxes 'the Great' of Persia. In the examination of the traits of Ancient Persia, once stripped of the bias against it by the Greeks, I found much more modern values imbued within it – multiculturalism, respect for others, tolerance, unity, respect for women, celebrating diversity, council, collaboration, discussion – than I did for the 'Greek' traits. And don't forget the profound impact that the Persian religion – Zoroastrianism – has had on the great monotheistic faiths of today, with its mantra of 'good thoughts, good words, good deeds', its guidance towards living a moral life, having a clear sense of what is good and what is evil, and being accountability for one's own actions![1] So, where did this 'West vs East' narrative begin? And for that, we must begin with Herodotus.

HERODOTUS

The idea that 'Western Civilization' as a fiction is a perspective aligning with scholastic interpretation of Herodotus' work. In constructing his historical narrative, he pivots the notion of opposites – Greek vs Persian / East vs West / the civilized [superior] vs the barbarians [inferior] – and, accordingly, attributes different characteristics to each. Therefore, WHY? Written within the context of war between Athens and Sparta (*The Peloponnesian War*, starting in 431 – 404 BCE), Herodotus' *Histories* are a reminder of what they [Athens and Sparta et alia] achieved as allies, when unified, standing together as 'Hellenes', as 'Greeks', against a enemy that accordingly had to be cast as exceedingly 'different' to them. [*The Persian Wars*, 494-479 BCE]. This 'dichotomy of difference' makes its way back into the historical narrative again and again, as Europe expands into the Middle East (Crusades) and relentlessly towards global domination (Imperialism). Which leaves us with this present 'battle' today, between the Left and the Right, about the construction, definition, and implications, that comes with the concept and terminology of 'Western' civilisation.

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[1] For more information on this, the following are good places to begin with:
https://zoroastrians.net/2021/11/21/zoroastrianism-the-religion-of-fire-that-inspired-the-hebrew-bible/
https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bible-ii

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones holds the chair in ancient history at Cardiff University and is the director of the Ancient Iran Program for the British Institute of Persian Studies. He has published widely on ancient history. In an article called '**On the West's Demonization of Ancient Persia'**, he writes: *"European superiority came not from Christianity, as had previously been thought throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, but from a cultural tradition that began in ancient Greece. … The Greek obsession with the Persians focused on minimizing their credibility as a superpower. Denigration of the Persians—by vilification or lampooning—was intended to cauterize the wounds of anguish and fear provoked by the threats and realities of being neighbours of an empire whose territorial ambitions were very real and which showed no sign of ever abating. … Since the era of the Greco-Persian Wars, the Persians themselves have been at the receiving end of a historiographic smear campaign in which they have been cast as the tyrannical oppressors of the free world."*

https://lithub.com/on-the-wests-demonization-of-ancient-persia/#:~:text=Denigration%20of%20the%20Persians%E2%80%94by,no%20sign%20of%20ever%20abating.

The east- west dichotomy, characterising the Greeks as 'freedom lovers, disciplined, rational, sophisticated in thinking, communal', contrasting with the Persians as cruel, licentious, lovers of luxury and deluded by sensory overload, quick to anger, slavishly obedient to autocratic authority, thus begins with Herodotus, continues with Greek writers after Alexander's conquest of Persia, is adopted by the Romans, reappears a little in the Crusades, but is then espoused and expounded to explain European global dominance of the world in the C19th, dramatically coinciding with the pseudo-scientific social Darwinism of the time – 'survival of the fittest', and reaching its zenith with Nazi racial theory inn the C20th. Naoíse Mac Sweeney, Professor of classical archaeology at the University of Vienna (having previously held posts at both Leicester and Cambridge Universities and been a researcher at Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies) mused the following in an article **'Why the Idea of Western Civilization is More Myth Than History' (**May 23, 2023).

> *One weekend, I found my younger son at the kitchen table, carefully writing out everything he knew about the Olympian gods for his school homework. His brow was furrowed, and he trained his eyes on the page with a level of concentration that I wish he would pay to his maths homework. So I asked him—casually, I thought—why he was so interested in the ancient Greeks. He beamed up at me with an angelic smile and answered, "Because that's what you study, Mama." At this point, my heart nearly burst with parental pride. I am a Professor of Classical Archaeology and the ancient Greeks are, quite literally, my bread and butter. But my heart sank when my son added as an afterthought,*

> *“and because the Greeks gave us Western Civilization.” Buckle up, kid, I thought, you’re in for a lecture. I wanted to tell him that the ancient Greeks did not give us Western Civilization. That there is no golden thread, unfurling unbroken through time from Plato to NATO. That we in the modern West are not the heirs of a unique and elevated cultural tradition, stretching back through Atlantic modernity to Enlightenment and Renaissance Europe, and from there through the darkness of the medieval period and ultimately back to the glories of classical Greece and Rome. For most of us, it seems normal—even natural—to think of Western history in these terms. Unthinkingly, we assume that the modern West is the custodian of a privileged inheritance, passed down through a kind of cultural genealogy that we usually refer to as “Western Civilization.” It is a version of history that is all around us, set out in popular textbooks, encoded implicitly into children’s stories and Hollywood movies, and proclaimed loudly and sometimes even angrily by commentators on both sides of the political spectrum.* ***But it is a version of history that is simply wrong.*** *… Western Civilization is not just a myth in the sense that it is a fiction that we tell ourselves, despite knowing that it is factually false.* ***It is a myth that was invented to justify slavery, imperialism, and oppression. As such, it served the ideological needs of the time of its invention, reflecting the core values of the society that produced it.***
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> https://lithub.com/why-the-idea-of-western-civilization-is-more-myth-than-history/

Those ideological needs being C19th nationalism, imperialism, militarism … and egotism … the ‘triumph of the West’ … being reduced to its core - a thinking that is basically racial superiority. With the ideas behind some of those working for the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation, this is still something being perpetrated by such institutions and their like, with this message being eagerly lapped up and idolized by a willing and largely uncritical, uneducated, super-jingoistic populace, dominated by a mostly white, xenophobic male boganistic mindset. As Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones said in an interview: “It's quite staggering that at the beginning of the 21st century people are still publishing that kind of work and people are still falling for the myth that goes beyond it. And that myth is very damaging” [The Eastern Report,, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LlfGb2g_xM].

He goes on to say:

> *… we have to recognize that the Persians were imperialists, and created a vast empire. The difference is* ***HOW*** *they then ran that empire and this is really*

very different from anything we see in antiquity. ***They never imposed their own language on the peoples of their empire; they never imposed one religion - a Persian religion - on the people of their empire; they never imposed one particular law on all the peoples of the empire. In fact, they had a very relaxed attitude to the running of their empire, as long as the taxes were paid and the treasury was full. Then, on the whole, different parts of the empire were allowed to operate under the laws and regulations that they'd always used.*** *There were Persian governors in place to make sure that those taxes were paid and, if there was rebellion or trouble, the Persians could come down very harshly on rebellious subjects.* ***But, by and large, it's what I would call an enlightened empire where actually there was a lot of leeway for individuals [and individual groups] to be themselves there****. Now, this is very different from, for example, what the Roman Empire was like.*

The Romans imposed the Latin language on everybody if you were anybody in the roman empire you had to speak Latin. Otherwise you couldn't get a job in the top echelons of society. Roman architecture is imposed on the places that the Romans conquered so you can go from Hadrian's wall all the way over to Syria and you will see the remains of Romanization plonked onto the landscapes themselves. A Roman dress was required and so forth. There, in Rome, was a far different attitude to what an empire can be. Why does this matter? It matters because of this so- called inheritance that Europe and the west had, and it's a simulation of European ideals with those of the 'Classical world' when Britain, at the end of the 18th century, began to build its own empire. It looked to one model - and that of course was to Rome. And Roman history of course was being taught to in all of the great public schools of the day. All of the school boys who then became Ministers of State and Prime Ministers had all learned about this way of governance. Thus, the Persians were written out of their education so they never even thought that there might be an alternative version to running an empire or, indeed, a far more liberal version to running an empire. So the result is that we have empire-building in the 19th and 20th centuries modelled on one of the most grotesque and harsh empire in history - that of the Romans, and not of the Persians

Given the shared global values of today, I think there is much more common ground to be found between modernity and Ancient Persia than there is with Greece and Rome - the supposed ‘foundation civilisations’ of the ‘West’.

The link between Modernity and Stupidity is the thinking that today’s shared universal global values are a product of and exclusive tribute to ‘Western’ civilisation.

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